



CHANCELLOR'S NOTES

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools



What do you believe about children in urban districts?

When I took this job in 2007, I was presented with some hard facts about our school system's performance, facts that have been cited to me countless times to make the case that school systems like ours were far beyond repair.

In 2007 in math, only 8% of eighth grade students had basic proficiency in the math skills they needed to be successful members of society. Only 9% of rising high school freshmen went on to graduate within five years after high school. Achievement gaps between white and minority students were up to 70%, and the list continued. Knowing the missed chances that it meant for thousands of children, it felt like a punch in the gut no matter how we cut the data.

Such numbers have discouraged educators, city planners and business leaders for years—especially when gifted leaders and hard working teachers have toiled countless evenings away trying to produce results in a bureaucracy that could drive even the most level-headed professionals berserk.

Any real discussion about changing these numbers forces us to examine what we really believe about children, race, poverty, and possibility. One reporter highlighted this for me a few months ago, when he

praised much of what we were doing to reform, but ended his article with a “reality check” to his reasonable readers.

To paraphrase, he seemed to be saying that my problem in talking about reform was that I actually believed my own talking points. It seemed I was delusional enough to think our students and staff could turn our performance around, and that DCPS could shed the infamy that has stemmed from our performance data for decades.

According to national test results released Tuesday, the educators and students who share my belief are producing dramatic results in math classrooms across the district.

Didn’t we just talk about math results? What is the NAEP/TUDA test?

Yes, in October we saw the impressive progress in math that DC students demonstrated compared to U.S. states on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

DC led the country in growth. Our 8th graders grew at three times the national average, and our 4th graders were the only group in the country to see gains in every subgroup, from African American students to students on free and reduced lunch. We were especially pleased about this knowing that NAEP is a national gold standard test administered from the outside.

The NAEP/TUDA—the **Trial Urban District Assessment** (<http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>) — is the same test as the NAEP, given at the 4th and 8th grade levels. However, the data is broken out differently, and helps us to see how we are doing compared to other major urban districts. In terms of growth, we now know DC students are not only outpacing other states, but that DCPS students in particular are outpacing other urban districts!

Results

- DCPS was the only district to grow more than **5 scale score points** in both 4th and 8th grade math—outpacing student growth in all other urban school districts. Similar gains have happened only twice before in the history of NAEP/TUDA (in Boston and San Diego), and not since 2005.

- Our 4th graders outpaced all other TUDA districts, ranking number one in student growth among tested districts for first time. 8th graders were second only to San Diego.

Rank of average scale score gains for fourth graders within all TUDA districts

Growth Rank (#) 2007 to 2009	TUDA Districts	Change 2007 to 2009
1	District of Columbia (DCPS)	6
2	Boston	3
3	San Diego	2
4	Chicago	2
5	Atlanta	2
6	Houston	2
7	New York City	1
8	Charlotte	1
9	Los Angeles	1
10	Austin	0
11	Cleveland	-2

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Data used in charts: from the National Assessment of Educational Progress

- Black 4th graders achieved the second highest gains within TUDA districts. 79% of our students are black.

- For the first time:

- More than half of our 4th graders have proficiency rates of basic and above.
- More than a third of our 8th eighth graders have proficiency rates of basic and above.

- Two years ago (the last time the NAEP was administered), we were 14 scale score points behind charter schools in 8th grade math performance. This year, we have a higher proficiency rate than charter schools at both the 4th and 8th grade levels.

- Both low-income and Hispanic 4th graders led the nation in gains. Hispanic 8th graders have closed the gap between our Hispanic students and their Hispanic urban and suburban peers nationally, through an increase of more than 20 percentage points in basic and above.

Rank of average scale score gains for Hispanic eighth graders within all TUDA Districts

Growth Rank (#) 2007 to 2009	TUDA Districts	Change 2007 to 2009
1	District of Columbia (DCPS)	15
2	Charlotte	8
3	San Diego	6
4	Houston	5
5	Chicago	4
6	Austin	3
7	Los Angeles	1
8	Boston	-1
9	New York City	-2
10	Cleveland	-7

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Data used in charts: from the National Assessment of Educational Progress

- We are getting better as a system for children of many races and backgrounds, not just for subgroups that have the greatest room for growth. Our white 4th grade students now have a higher average score than white peers in any other TUDA district. They also had a higher increase in average score than white peers in any other TUDA district.
- DCPS is no longer the worst performing school district in the country.
 - At the 4th grade level we are 11th out of 18 in proficiency—jumping ahead of Chicago.
 - Taking 4th and 8th grade together, DCPS's growth in math over the last two years (2007 – 2009) is higher than in any previous year in the history of TUDA.
- At the 8th grade level we are 13th out of 18 in proficiency—jumping ahead of Atlanta.

And there is more (<http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>). Our students and teachers are making it very clear that there is good reason to believe in them.

How can the NAEP/TUDA help us to improve?

The NAEP/TUDA is a critical breakdown of the data for helping urban districts to succeed. When a school in DC turns out a 9% proficiency rate while another down the road faces the same challenges yet maintains over 90% proficiency, we know it is possible for urban schools to perform at the same rates as suburban schools.

However, what has happened in individual schools has not happened on the scale of an entire school district before—in part, because our job is harder. It is much more difficult to teach in a classroom in which children are hungry and walk home through dangerous neighborhoods every day.

The NAEP/TUDA allows us to hone in on what is happening in districts similar to ours, focusing on growth in cities and examining the elements that produce and limit success. We can use the results to tackle the challenges that are unique to cities, to replicate success and avoid the pitfalls that have created obstacles to student achievement in other cities.

Data from Washington Post, December 9, 2009, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress

 = best score each year.

Fourth-grade	2003	2005	2007	2009
D.C. public charter schools	203	216	214	217
D.C. regular public schools	205	210	214	220
Nation's public charter schools	228	232	234	231
Nation's regular public schools	234	237	239	239
Nation's large city schools	224	228	230	231
Eighth-grade				
D.C. public charter schools	n/a	250	258	256
D.C. regular public schools	243*	244	244	251
Nation's public charter schools	n/a	268	273	275
Nation's regular public schools	276	278	280	282
Nation's large city schools	262	265	269	271

* Includes some D.C. charter schools. Some 2003 data for eighth grade not available.

How does this kind of growth happen?

As Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools, said about our results, "Gains of this magnitude do not happen by accident. They happen because there are real reforms beneath them."

As a system we were able to build on the good work of our predecessors who began the progress, and our concentrated district-wide focus on math from 2007-2009 has allowed us to move ahead even more.

For example, teachers have been using assessments that include constructed response questions, which challenge students to use critical thinking in their assessments. They have been using Beyond Everyday Math games at the elementary level, as well as pre-tests to use data to drive their instruction.

Ultimately, I believe that such gains come from the students themselves, and the DCPS staff working to challenge them to higher levels.

Students and staff, we're so proud of you!

It is difficult to fully express how proud I am of our students, school and central office staff who have achieved this together. Many have persevered for decades in the face of statistics that have driven countless hopeful people to cynicism and defeat. (I have only been here for 2 ½ years and cannot overstate how great it feels to shed the weight of "lowest in the country" from our shoulders in a subject so critical.)

When we saw 8% proficiency among eighth graders 2 years ago, the whole city rallied for a change, and we knew that "tweaking around the edges" was not going to cut it. In DC and cities across the country, we are learning more every year about what is possible when we stand by the hard decisions needed for all students to succeed.

What next?

We keep going. Considering overall proficiency rates, this has to be just the beginning. Teachers are immersed in working with a new Teaching and Learning Framework (<http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/Teaching+and+Learning/Teaching+and+Learning+Framework>) and performance assessment this year. They are collaborating with colleagues in new ways and using data to drive their instruction even more than in the first two years.

The end goal is still some long nights and hard work ahead, and teachers are working just as strategically on their lesson plans today as they were last week. Only now, they can do so with some hard data that the work is paying off in enormous ways across the district. If we continue on this path, there will be even greater success to come.

Shouting Math Data from the Rooftops

I have heard a few times that I should not state or share the hard facts about our school system. I should focus on the positive instead, and should shout that from the rooftops. While I disagree, I do believe that heroic work has been happening in this school system for decades, and we need to do more than talk about it. We need to reward it and replicate it.

I have often replied that I would start shouting from the rooftops when I saw our results change as a system, when I saw that we were undeniably moving forward in student.

It is now time to start shouting when the public school system of our nation's capital is leading the nation in student math growth. My rooftop is actually covered with ice right now, or I would be there with a megaphone!

To our students and staff, your work...is working. Students are learning more in math than they were before. You are reversing cynical and stubborn beliefs about students in urban districts that are as old as urban districts themselves but are long ready to dissolve.

Congratulations, and keep going.

How did math teachers produce these results? Read what DCPS math teachers have to say.

Lisa Jones, 4th Grade, Watkins Education Campus

"[The NAEP scores report is] rewarding news, especially for children who traditionally are not considered to be high performers. It goes to show what good teaching and good student dedication can do. These children really have every right to an education that is well-rounded and deals with them on their level and allows them to progress. A lot of children are afraid of math and become alienated from it because of so many reasons and so no one expects them to do well... I'd put my fourth graders up against any class in the nation. I tell them what society's perceptions of them are – that DC is a failing school system – but I let them know they can do anything.

You have to descramble the math myth. You have to make the children understand that math is not some weird, foreign subject that you only deal with in books but that it's an everyday tool. We use it at the grocery store and to buy PS3s and at McDonalds; you have to make it relatable...

I'm a little unconventional. We have multiplication madness where we time them on how many tables they can do in 5 minute increments; I do mini-teaching where I train a group of students to teach their peers if they score a B or above. I give them a dry erase board and marker and tell them to teach their peers. The best mini-teacher at the end of the week gets prizes. We sing, we dance.

There's this underestimation of the relationship between math and the arts as well so I really trying to integrate the two in the process through math dances and songs and chants. They learn concepts that way. Teachers must be passionate and instill in their children a pride that what they do will carry them to the next level...

The things that captivate their interest in their daily lives are far more intriguing; it's our job to make math the same thing."

Ms. Fields and Ms. Buggs team-teach at Raymond Education Campus. They have been with the same group of students for the students' 3rd – 5th grade year, including the year the students' took the NAEP in their 4th grade year.

Ms. Judith Fields

"As a grade-level team, we worked hard. We planned together and encouraged our children to use planning strategies for whatever objectives we were working on... We go over homework from each night – they have homework four nights per week – and work to make sure they understand. ...Our children get to move and interact and work in teams. They have to share the objectives, the skills and the standards, as well as why it's all important, with their peers. We try to make those real-world connections as we teach as well."

Ms. Shirley Buggs

"It's more than teaching: we encouraged the students and pushed them to work toward high standards...The parents can't be left out: they're very supportive, helping us along, encouraging the kids with homework help and coming out to parent-teacher conferences."

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